

THE POCAHONTAS TIMES

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CALVIN W. PRICE, EDITOR

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I have often thought that I would take a few days off and write a book. And then I think of all the outpouring of my most intimate thoughts through the county paper and other mediums and that something like fifty books would be required to preserve the millions of words that I have strung together. I come to the conclusion that it is just as well that the stream flows evenly along toward the sea of oblivion. And I have of late years thought that I could write a play. And of still later years that I could write a moving picture drama. All of those temptations have been withstood.

But the other day I uncovered some events of the Civil War that would make a book and a moving picture too, in my opinion.

You have been informed as to the friendship that has sprung up between Col. Lewis McClung, of Highland county, in the later years of our lives, and that on a visit to his plantation he asked me to see if I could find out anything about that brave and courageous girl, Peggy Hart or Nancy Hart, who acted as a Confederate spy for the mountain division in the sixties.

Col. McClung was an officer in the Confederacy and was in command, I think, of the expedition that relieved Summersville, the county seat of Nicholas county, which was being strongly held by the Union forces. On that campaign, one of the prisoners taken was the late Dr. W. P. Rucker, a distinguished lawyer of this section, and the father of four distinguished sons, one of whom was the famous W. W. Rucker, who served in Congress from Missouri for so many years. By the way as a Democrat too. Col. McClung says that he was specially instructed to capture Dr. Rucker who was known to be within the Union lines. That they had expected to find him at a certain house and had searched the house and concluded that he was not there, and were turning to leave the premises, when one of the soldiers remarked that he was about barefooted and that he would take a pair of boots that were in a room there, and when he grabbed the boots he found that the man they were looking for was in them. He was held prisoner at Covington, until a special message was received from the headquarters of the Union army, that if anything happened to Dr. Rucker, that three Confederate officers would be executed in retaliation. Then there was a conference, the result of which was that the military authorities decided to leave the door of the jail unlocked, and that ended Dr. Rucker's jeopardy.

It was on this expedition that Col. McClung saw Peggy Hart and he suggested that I find out something if I could of her subsequent history. I came home and wrote to some friends in Nicholas county but could not get any connected story of her life and times but I continued to make inquiries and got a clue in the State library in the department of history at Charleston, that led to some stirring history of the early years of the Civil War. The words "the notorious Perry Connelly," in Dr. Barton's autobiography in which he speaks of dressing the wounds inflicted on Samuel W. Gibson. The lower part of his face had been shot away by Connelly. And when I inquired about Connelly, the tragedy connected up with Peggy Hart.

The Connelly family lived in the edge of Roane county. When the war broke out one of the sons, Perry Connelly, fought for the Confederacy and James Connelly for the Union, and with both it was considered to be a war of extermination.

In my search at the library, I was most kindly and considerately treated by the State historian, Hon. Clifford B. Myers. He is a veteran of the World War and had the unusual experience of reading the official report of his death, and had to see out papers to call himself back to a legal existence. He was terribly wounded and left for dead, but was able to reach home alive, though he will always show the result of his wounds in his walking. Being an educated man with a penchant for history he was given the pleasant and important post of state historian which he fills so well.

The Connelly family was divided by the war. Perry adhered to Virginia, and James Connelly, his brother, defended the Union. Their mother was a woman of great force of character. On one occasion in the early days of the war both brothers came to the house for breakfast early one morning. One entered one door and the other another. They met in the house both carrying guns. They started to draw and shoot, but the mother stepped in between them and told them to sit down and eat and behave themselves or she would spank both of them. She is described as a small woman. Perry Connelly was about six feet three inches tall and very large and powerful. He could out run, out fight and out lift anybody in the county. He could hit up a pace of eight miles an hour and keep it up indefinitely. And it is said of him that if he needed an alibi that he could put fifty or sixty miles between the scene of the occurrence and his presence between dusk and dawn.

At the outbreak of the war, in these mountains sentiment was divided. Great numbers of young men immediately volunteered and entered the regular army, some on one side and some on the other. But there were large numbers of men who were gathered into hostile groups of armed defenders, who were never recognized as regular soldiers. They were referred to generally as home guards and were dreaded and feared by the people far more than the regular armies. There were two State governments and civil affairs were in a chaotic condition. This section has

never entirely recovered from the terrible experience. A word was coined that makes us wince yet. It is a West Virginia word of local origin. Bushwhacker. The dictionary says that it is a guerrilla that beats through the bushes. But that is not the way we understand it. It refers to the man who strikes from the concealment of the leafy growth. And when the leaden ball sang from the foliage covering the hill, the word was bushwhacking.

During the first year of the war, Spencer, the county seat of Roane county, was held by the Union local forces and it was surrounded by Confederates. The siege was kept up for a time. Dr. Poole, a young doctor of that town, armed himself in the Union cause, and stationed himself as a sharpshooter in the cupola of the courthouse and for some days made it exceedingly dangerous for any Confederate to come within gunshot of that building.

Perry Connelly had a rifle that was effective at an unusually long range for guns in those days. After a time he succeeded in killing Dr. Poole by shooting through the side of the cupola, like a hunter firing through a squirrel's nest in a tree.

A short time afterwards, Dr. Poole's father, a prominent Roane county man known as Col. Poole, was in a tent camp with the Union soldiers near Spencer, on top of a hill. About day break, Col. Poole waking from sleep came to the door of his tent and raised his arms and stretched after the manner of a man who has just come out of sound sleep. While in this attitude a rifle cracked and the Colonel fell dead. This was ascribed to Perry Connelly, who was then becoming a terror to the central part of West Virginia. The band that Connelly belonged to at the beginning of the war was known as The Guerrillas, and they were not mustered into service in the regular army until after the death of Connelly.

Connelly was also credited with killing three other men, Rodgers, Carpenter, and Cohn. And Samuel Martin had an arm shot away, and Rev. Samuel W. Gibson lost the lower part of his face, all blamed on Perry Connelly.

It became a matter of prime importance with the Union forces to get rid of Connelly and he was hunted through the mountains.

Hon. Warren B. Hays, of Charleston, related the story of Connelly to me. He knew him well. He said that his uncle was with Connelly when they were surprised in a bit of woodland in Webster county by Union soldiers, who fired on them before they knew they were in danger. Connelly was wounded and fell. Hays was unhurt and was able to escape.

Connelly lay on the ground and fought off his assailants until his ammunition failed and the soldiers surrounded him and he still fought until he was clubbed into submission, and he died from his wounds received in that fight.

It is apparent that Roane county like every border county had a war within a war. The North and South were in a great struggle for supremacy, but in every county of the debatable lands that were striven for by the Union powers from Wheeling, and by the Confederates from Richmond, there was a private war, that distressed the local population far more than the great armies so far away. The history of these local conflicts were known and discussed around every hearthstone in the country, but very little of it is preserved in the printed history of the great war, for it very nearly touched many families who were trying to forget the ravages of war, in the beneficent peace that Lincoln insured to us, who had submitted the question of secession to the arbitration of arms, and lost.

In Connelly's company was a remarkable girl, Nancy Hart, sometimes called Peggy Hart. She was a girl in her twenties. Black eyed. Of medium height and build. Of modern education. Very active and vivacious. And very beautiful. She was a Confederate, bred in the bone. She was the eyes of the local army. For it was not very long until that part of West Virginia was securely held by the Union forces and the local Confederate fighters were put to the woods and the hills.

Connelly's death caused the little army to disintegrate and the soldiers found their way into the regular Confederate army, but Nancy Hart continued to be of great service to the Confederate army, as a spy.

The near by county seat of Nicholas county, Summersville, was held by the Union troops, but it was near to the Greenbrier country that was for the most part of the war within the Confederate lines.

Nancy Hart was captured and held as a spy in the jail at Summersville. After a time the soldiers guarding this slip of a girl grew careless and underestimated the danger of her charge. She was allowed some freedom about the jail yard, and she talked to the soldiers freely and everything seemed to be running along smoothly. One night she approached one of the sentinels and engaged him in a conversation, and she was allowed to examine a pistol that he carried. When the girl secured the pistol she shot the guard dead and made her escape and was not taken again.

The war in the mountains after the first eighteen months "swinged down into a soft misery," as the man said about his tooth ache. The North maintained a Mountain Division of some five thousand troops, and the South did likewise, and these armies marched up and down the troughs of the Alleghenies, and east and west across the ridges, meeting at times and fighting battles, and displaying courage and sagacity, and military genius, but which are lost sight of and swallowed up in the great maneuvers on the plains of the eastern slope, where it was possible to handle great bodies of soldiers, and where the death and destruction were corresponding greater.

But all the time the mountain country reached far south and divided the great slave-holding peoples of the Atlantic seaboard from those of the Mississippi valley, and now historians are more inclined to give credit to

those small mountain armies for the ending of the war than they formerly were. It is no uncommon thing for a handful of mountaineers to decide the fate of a teeming low lying land.

But such is general history. Most of the stirring local events of the war are already lost, and it is remarkable how fast they have faded out in the last few years. Just the other day, it seems to me, that there were men on every hand who could give the details of every important event of those war times, and now when the historian is in need of some information and his mind dwells on the names of the men that could give it to him he finds that they have one by one crept silently to rest.

Just the other day an old gentleman told me about lying on the hillside at the end of where Main Street, is now. He was watching the west end of the covered bridge, and his object was to get himself a Confederate soldier. A Confederate soldier rode up on the west side of the river and stopped his horse to peer through the bridge. The rifleman was peering through the sights ready to pull the trigger. His hand was stayed in a way that caused him to wonder. "The gentlemen bushwacker said: 'Just then the soldiers turned and I saw his face. It was one of your uncles. I come pretty near killing a neighbor boy. I have always been glad I did not shoot.'"

They tell me that Peggy Hart married Joshua Douglas, whom I remember as an old timer. They settled in the great mountain wilderness around the head of Spring Creek, and but for one more tragedy, she rounded out a peaceful and contented life.

In the eighties, about Christmas time, the country rang with the news of the killing of Thomas Reed on Spring Creek in Greenbrier County, and the hue and cry for Kenos Douglas, a fugitive, charged with that killing. Kenos Douglas lay in a laurel patch for five weeks in the dead of winter in the mountains, but was captured and a great murder trial held at Lewisburg, in which Dr. W. P. Rucker, as the counsel for Douglas made the defense. The result was a verdict of guilty in the first degree and a life sentence in the penitentiary.

Kenos Douglas was a son of Joshua Douglas. Public feeling was very bitter against the prisoner at the time, but when the years had somewhat softened the resentment of outraged society, more blame was attached to the whiskey that caused the killing, and Douglas paroled or pardoned.

But in the first instance, there was an almost universal demand for vengeance against the boy.

The Reeds and the Douglases were neighbors but were not intimate. Reed gave a chopping bee in December and Kenos Douglas was not invited. The chopping continued during the day and wound up with a party at the Reed homestead that night.

Douglas of a party of five went to the Reed home uninvited. They found a considerable gathering of the neighbors still there late in the evening. The uninvited guests were received and made welcome, but Kenos Douglas was in an ugly mood. He drew a revolver and fired through the loose board ceiling of the room twice. This naturally broke up the festivities to some extent, but as there were more shots in the revolver, a good deal of concern was made manifest as to how they were to be disposed of. Kenos Douglas waved the pistol around and pointed it at a bed in which some small children were sleeping. Reed spoke to him gently but firmly and insisted on Douglas leaving, and Douglas's own friends surrounded him and slowly pressed him towards the door to get him away. Reed followed closely and just when Douglas passed the portal, Reed closed the door against him, and while the door was fast shut, but before Reed had released the door knob, a bullet from the pistol came splintering through the door and killed Reed, and Douglas fled into the shelter of the mountain.

An effort was made to show that just as Douglas passed out of the door and just as it was closed a mysterious man in a cloak with his face concealed passed by the door and fired the fatal shot and went on and was not seen again.

After a time the authorities became satisfied that accident played a great part in the killing, that is, to the extent that Douglas tried to fire in the air as he had done before, but that one of his friends in trying to keep him from firing, and in an effort to get possession of the pistol, pulled his arm down, and in this way the bullet went through the door and killed Reed.

And this is the story of a heroine of the Civil War as it was given me from various sources.

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This 9th day of May, 1924.
J. E. Kee
C. V. Kee
Administrators estate of George M. Kee, deceased.

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NOTICE

The Board of Review and Equalization of Pocahontas County, West Virginia, will meet at the Court House thereof, on Thursday, the 12th day of June, 1924 for the purpose of reviewing and equalizing the assessment of the county as returned by the Assessor of said County for the year 1924 as required by law.

Given under my hand this 28th day of May, 1924.
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County Court of said County.

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